

# Gluten-free trend has legs, for now

Celebs touting it as a weight-loss solution is both good news and bad news for celiac sufferers

BY ERIN ELLIS, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 16, 2012



Steve Tsonev, who is just 20 years old, owns the gluten-free bakery and café Panne Rizo in Kitsilano. The number of gluten-free foods on the market has exploded.

**Photograph by:** Kim Stallknecht, PNG

Once you've spotted gluten-free shampoo on the store shelf, you know the trend's gone too far.

Whether food contains gluten — a protein found in wheat, rye and barley — used to concern a relatively small group of people who suffer from celiac disease, an autoimmune reaction to gluten in the small intestine. While growing numbers of people have been diagnosed with the disorder over the last decade, the crowds that have jumped on the gluten-free bandwagon for other reasons outstrip them.

Gluten never was in most shampoos, by the way, save those containing wheat germ oil. Unless you plan to drink it, it's harmless since gluten must be ingested for the body to react, says Peter Taylor, executive director of the Canadian Celiac Association.

"We see the market for gluten-free going crazy," says dietitian and author Shelley Case, "but who needs it and who doesn't?"

Case, who has celiac disease and has written *Gluten Free Diet*; a comprehensive resource guide,

blames celebrities for promoting gluten-free as a weight-loss regime. It muddies the water for celiac sufferers who must shun it if they want to prevent recurring diarrhea, abdominal pain and bloating, migraines, anemia and a host of symptoms that vary between individuals.

Grown-up child star Miley Cyrus says she needs a gluten-free diet. To quote her on Twitter: "For everyone calling me anorexic I have a gluten and lactose allergy. It's not about weight it's about health. Gluten is crapppp anyway!" She has almost eight million followers.

Then there's global pop sensation Lady Gaga, who recently said she's ditched gluten to stay thin. And reality TV fixture Kim Kardashian who inexplicably tweeted a photo of herself in May wearing a black bikini with studded garters and thigh-high, stiletto-heeled boots with this message, "Gluten free is the way to be ..." She has nearly 16 million followers on Twitter.

"It takes it out of the medical model and puts it into the area of lifestyle choice," says Ellen Bayens, the founder of a Victoria-based website called [theceliacscene.com](http://theceliacscene.com).

There's an overall benefit for celiacs because people have now heard of gluten and are more likely to know what it is, she says. The downside is that restaurants are now being inundated with people on a gluten-free diet who don't have celiac disease. Chefs and servers are less likely to take the painstaking care required to prevent cross-contamination with wheat flour, because they now see "gluten-free" customers ordering pie for dessert.

"We're wearing out our welcome," says Bayens.

"When I go to a restaurant now and say I can't have any gluten, I'll get the server asking me, 'How sensitive are you?' ... So you're having a medical consultation with your server."

On the bright side for people who suffer ill health from gluten, the food industry's growing attention to the area means they have many more foods from which to choose.

Author Case says she listed 1,600 gluten-free products in the first edition of her book in 2001. The 2010 edition contained 3,100.

But many of those are highly processed foods with little nutritional value and certainly aren't diet-wise. A sugary, fatty cookie remains so even if the wheat flour in it has been replaced with rice flour, for instance.

Then there are "gluten-free" labels on products that never had gluten in the first place. Traditional corn tortillas, for instance, don't have any other grain in them. Neither does a steak, potato or salad without croutons.

"People are paying a premium for stuff they don't really need," says Case from her Regina office.

So what's going on?

Research by Alessio Fasano at the University of Maryland Centre for Celiac Research in Baltimore has

found that about one in 133 Americans have celiac disease, which often runs in families. The vast majority of them are never diagnosed or, if they are, it takes an average of 12 years of back and forth with doctors who usually suspect that something else is wrong with their patients such as irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease or chronic fatigue.

Another six per cent of the population has a sensitivity to gluten that might make them feel sluggish or have fuzzy thinking, according to Fasano. This group also feels better when they eliminate wheat-based products from their diet.

And then there is everyone else, people who may feel more energetic on a gluten-free diet because they stopped eating cake, cookies, pizza, beer and burgers.

The risk for celiacs is that the definitive test for the disease is an intestinal biopsy which will only be accurate if the patient has been consuming gluten. Blood tests are also used to measure antibodies produced by the immune system in response to gluten. It's because celiac disease is associated with dangerous conditions, such as miscarriage in pregnant women, a proper diagnosis helps patients get the treatment they need. Living with celiac disease, untreated, can lead to other conditions such as osteoporosis and Type 1 diabetes.

Another factor is a best-selling book called *Wheat Belly: Lose the Wheat, Lose the Weight, and Find Your Path Back to Health* by U.S. cardiologist Dr. William Davis. He tells readers they can't properly digest modern strains of wheat that are responsible for a host of health problems. Critics say there's no scientific support for his theory and the diet is nothing more than a new twist on the high-protein, low carbohydrate Dr. Atkins' diet first popularized in the 1970s.

Will it last? Bayens says no.

"It's a trend that's going to have its day because it's restrictive and so expensive."

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Resources on the Web

[www.celiac.ca](http://www.celiac.ca), [www.theceliacscene.com](http://www.theceliacscene.com), [www.celiaccenter.org](http://www.celiaccenter.org)

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